# The David Lynch Syllabus



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## There's not nearly enough time to sift through all of the brilliant oddball's oeuvre before the improbable return of 'Twin Peaks' on Sunday, so here's a helpful guide

*By Alison Herman and Rob Harvilla*






David Lynch is a consummate artist. Filmmaker, painter, musician, coffee merchant: Lynch wears all hats with equal enthusiasm. In 71 years on the planet and four decades in feature filmmaking—*Eraserhead* celebrated its 40th anniversary back in March—he has produced an enormous body of movies, interviews, albums, and a certain iconic TV show to sift through. Lynch might not be our most prolific major filmmaker (he hasn't made a feature film in 11 years and recently said he doesn't plan on doing so again). He is, however, one of our most prolific public figures, and one of the few to have an adjective derived from his own name.

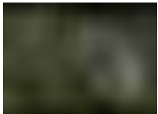
*Twin Peaks* makes its improbable, incredible return on Showtime this Sunday, leaving precious little time for a full overview of Lynch's oeuvre, which would take years and several Transcendental Meditation breaks to do properly. So we've compiled a compressed guide to our personal favorite chapters from a career as erratic, enigmatic, and counterintuitively wholesome as the man himself. No one will ever quite know what compelled a man who looks, talks, and acts like a Midwestern insurance salesman to channel the darkest corners of our national consciousness, but we can pinpoint the classics, side projects, and interpretive texts that have affected us in the way only crowdsourced nightmares can. This is *The Ringer*'s highly subjective but deeply felt guide to David Lynch beyond his most popular, and quite possibly final, major work.

**Wild at Heart: The Long, Varied Career of Laura Dern**
*The multifaceted veteran actress is both hard to categorize and curiously undercelebrated*theringer.com

## 'Blue Velvet' (1986)

**Alison Herman:** Much of the *Variety* feature detailing the behind-the-scenes story of the *Twin Peaks* revival gave me cause for hope, but this quote from Showtime president and CEO David Nevins gave me pause: "He has certain ideas about the ideal of America. Not to relate it too much to the present, but he has certain ideas about Midwestern American wholesomeness. But I think he's also incredibly aware of the flip side of it."

Nevins isn't wrong, but he also isn't quite emphatic enough to be right. To *think* David Lynch is aware of the white American idyll's festering underbelly is the understatement of the century. This is the man who gave us that concept's defining visual metaphor: the rotting, bug-devoured ear that lies beneath the verdant lawns of Lumberton, North Carolina. ("The first things I thought about were lawns—lawns and the neighborhood," the director would almost redundantly clarify in *Lynch on Lynch,* the book of interviews with editor Chris Rodley.) The image from *Blue Velvet*'s opening minutes is perhaps the ultimate testament to the intuitive power of David Lynch, condensing into a handful of frames what the rest of us would spend pages of dialogue or thousands of words attempting to express.



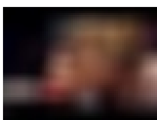


(De Laurentiis Entertainment Group)

In the chronological order of Lynch’s filmography, *Blue Velvet* comes just before *Twin Peaks.* The two works feel inextricably tied, and not just because they share Lynch’s male muse, Kyle MacLachlan, as a star—though burgeoning creepazoid Jeffrey Beaumont couldn’t be more different from the radiantly decent Agent Cooper. Together, they make up Lynch’s most direct assault on a certain vision of Americana. Small towns and suburbs aren’t a refuge from evil, Lynch argues. They’re a mask for it, and an inevitably temporary one at that.

Jeffrey fancies himself an Eagle Scout type, the kind of man who’s drawn to Sandy (Laura Dern) and not Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini). (No one loves a blonde-brunette duality as much as—well, Hitchcock, but Lynch is a close second.) As some highly revealing deleted footage shows, however, Jeffrey’s *always* had a dark side; all Lumberton’s criminal element had to do was draw it out of him. At least Frank Booth has the decency to demand a Pabst Blue Ribbon when he wants one.

## ‘Mulholland Drive’ (2001)



**Rob Harvilla:** “I’m just in this dream place,” a starry-eyed Naomi Watts gushes early on in this alluring neo-noir nightmare. “You can imagine how I feel.” No, Naomi, we cannot. She

says this shortly after this extremely scary guy pops up, but long before her own labyrinthine character arc, as an aspiring actress who embarks on a sumptuous love affair with a tremulous amnesiac played by Laura Elena Harring, gets incredibly bleak and disorienting. So much so, in fact, that many critics who loved this movie freely admit that they have no idea what the hell really happens in it.

*Mulholland Drive* is a surrealist mystery, and a deranged adventure, and a love letter to Hollywood that morphs into something more like a suicide note. It is *La La Land* as brutally reimagined by … well, David Lynch. It's arguably his best movie, and even more arguably his most *complete* movie, with a beginning, a middle, and an end—just maybe not in that order. The characters are drawn so deftly and sympathetically that it hits twice as hard when they start acting like different people; there is a foundation of sanity that only heightens the encroaching insanity. It's a sweeping, inspiring romance, if only in the filmmakers' heads. "It's beautiful," longtime Lynch editor-producer cohort Mary Sweeney said last month. "I don't quite understand it. It gives me hope."

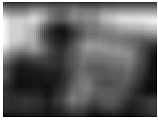
It also costars Justin Theroux as a golf-club-wielding filmmaker blowhard who is menaced by a gangster with intense espresso opinions and later goes home to find his wife in the sack with Billy Ray Cyrus. It is peppered with distinctly Lynchian disorientations, from the Cowboy to the Silencio nightclub. And it features what Roger Ebert described as "two lesbian love scenes so sexy you'd swear this was a 1970s movie, made when movie audiences liked sex."

But of all this movie's startling images and confounding misdirections, nothing's quite as shocking as Watts's audition scene, when she transforms from a guileless fawn into an apex predator, wowing a roomful of jaded show-biz operators, onscreen and, most likely, offscreen as well. Lynch's heroines tend to suffer operatically: His next film, 2006's even crazier *Inland Empire*, pulls and prods poor Laura Dern in terrifying ways. Watts's character has her own hellscape to navigate, but her brazen jubilation is what sticks with you. There's no way to adequately explain what happens in this movie. But 16 years later, there's an oddly delightful subtext: It's a dark fable about how Hollywood will destroy you that ended up launching Watts's Hollywood career. However inadvertent, that's as concrete and triumphant an ending as you'll find in any Lynch project, ever.

## 'Wild at Heart' (1990)

**Herman:** What *Blue Velvet* does for picket fences and home-cooked dinners, *Wild at Heart* does for a different, yet related, strand of our national iconography: the youthful rebels who've escaped civilization for life on the open road. (Lynch called the film "a love story that barrels along down a strange highway through the twisted modern world.") Like

everything Lynch does, it's unmistakably a product of his own vision—that lipstick scene! —yet *Wild at Heart* has an obvious kinship with the work of John Waters, another great American eccentric. The most overtly parodic of Lynch's films, *Wild at Heart* shares Waters's bemused affection for teen rebels, personified here by Laura Dern and Nic Cage doing his best James Dean impression.



Along with *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart* makes up *Twin Peaks*' other spiritual bookend in Lynch's body of work. And it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes just two years before Lynch would be roundly booed for *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me,* as good a demonstration as any of the Cannes audience's notoriously harsh and mercurial temperament.

*Wild at Heart* also embodies the most persistent misunderstanding of Lynch's work by his contemporary critics. In a representative review, *Cineaste*'s Christopher Sharrett wrote, "One is never sure what Lynch likes or dislikes, and his often striking images are too often lacking in compassion for us to accept him as a chronicler of a moribund landscape a la Fellini." But perhaps the most disorienting aspect of Lynch's sensibility—more than the bizarre dialogue, more than the discomfiting visuals—is that his subversion coexists with an utter sincerity that, say, Waters never had. Baltimore's creepy uncle will always be an outsider looking in; the Eagle Scout from Montana leans closer to Dale Cooper than Jeffrey Beaumont. For all the callowness or satire that people saw in *Wild at Heart*, Lynch buys into the myth of the American road trip as much as any college freshman who's stumbled on his first Kerouac. (On what drew him to the Barry Gifford novel on which the film is based: "The book impressed me a lot with that title: *Wild at Heart*, this wild and crazy world, these people you can't imagine being tender, loving, and at peace.") It's the depth of that belief that convinces people he can't be for real.

## "David Lynch Keeps His Head," by David Foster Wallace (1996)

**Herman:** Reported from the set of *Lost Highway* and originally published in *Premiere Magazine*, "David Lynch Keeps His Head" matches the most stubbornly antiverbal, wholly intuitive mind in mainstream filmmaking with the most hyperverbal, compulsively articulate mind in literature. (There's an abridged version of the 1995 profile available online, and an extended one that takes up more almost 70 pages of the bound essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*).The result is definitive, both an accurate assessment of Lynch's work and a candid testament to his surprisingly efficient and straightforward presence during production. (David Lynch is not, for the most part, a prima donna artiste; for someone so good at the visionary part of filmmaking, he's also adept at

the part that involves keeping hundreds of people on the same page and schedule.)

“David Lynch Keeps His Head” works on multiple fronts: as an incredibly detailed dispatch from the middle of Lynch’s creative process; as a film-by-film analysis of Lynch’s work and how it represents his strengths and weaknesses; and, most importantly, as a mid-career attempt at an overarching thesis of *what it all means*. The following passage, about Foster Wallace’s experience of seeing *Blue Velvet* in a theater for the first time—an event that made such an impression he remembers its precise date: March 30th, 1986—forever colored the way I not just think about David Lynch, but art as a whole:

> *The movie’s obvious “themes”—the evil flip side to picket-fence respectability, the conjunctions of sadism and sexuality and parental authority and voyeurism and cheesy ’50s pop and Coming of Age, etc.—were for us less revelatory than the way the movie’s surrealism and dream-logic felt: they felt true, real. This was what was epiphanic for us about Blue Velvet in grad school, when we saw it: the movie helped us realize that first-rate experimentalism was a way not to “transcend” or “rebel against” the truth but actually to honor it. It brought home to us—via images, the medium we were suckled on and most credulous of—that the very most important artistic communications took place at a level that not only wasn’t intellectual but wasn’t even fully conscious, that the unconscious’s true medium wasn’t verbal but imagistic, and that whether the images were Realistic or Postmodern or Expressionistic or Surreal or what-the-hell-ever was less important than whether they felt true, whether they rang psychic cherries in the communicatee.*

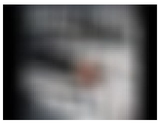
Both Lynch and Foster Wallace have somewhat unfair reputations as dorm room gateway drugs. It’s unfair in the sense that each artist is more sophisticated than the teenagers they have a penchant for bowling over; it’s fair in the sense that both tend to light up a certain curiosity in the viewer/reader, prompting them to keep watching and reading in an attempt to chase that sense of discovery. It’s only fate that they came together.

## ‘Crazy Clown Time’ (2011) and ‘The Big Dream’ (2013)

**Harvilla:** Millions of words have been written (and billions of very deep feelings have been felt) about David Lynch’s masterful and utterly unsettling use of music, from his menacing distortions of wholesome ’50s and ’60s nostalgia to composer cohort Angelo Badalamenti’s singular New Age dysphoria. Lynch was a legit musician from the

beginning, working with Badalamenti on breathy *Twin Peaks* icon Julee Cruise's early albums, composing for some of his own films, and indulging the occasional one-off collaboration you are usually better off not investigating:

But in 2011 came *Crazy Clown Time*, his official solo debut, which is not the most horrifying sonic experience you'll ever have, despite being a David Lynch project with the words "crazy clown" in the title. Neither the genre nor the overall vibe will surprise his devotees: It's mostly cracked blues and oddball electropop, noirish and mildly nauseating. Karen O handles the vocals on opening track "Pinky's Dream," but otherwise it's mostly your weird, old Uncle David declaiming through various vocal filters, warped but never unrecognizable. "Strange and Unproductive Thinking" sums up the uneasy appeal well enough, a lengthy robotic ramble about cosmic awareness and tooth decay.



*The Big Dream* followed in 2013, a smoother and sleeker fount of digital psychedelia, like a less poppy the Flaming Lips fronted by a way less phlegmatic Tom Waits. Swedish indie-pop brooder Lykke Li shows up on the deluxe-edition track "I'm Waiting Here"; you also get a droning cover of Bob Dylan's "Ballad of Hollis Brown." It's the better album, though neither one is, strictly speaking, particularly enjoyable. Lynch doesn't do stunts or even larks. You can tell he is taking all this Very Seriously, if for only as long as the tape's rolling. But these records give you an idea of where he's coming from sonically: He clearly favors genre-agnostic music that's droning and soothing enough to rock you gently to sleep, but random and macabre enough to give you nightmares. It'll all make you grateful that most of the rest of the time he's willing to let someone else jump in the driver's seat and/or whisper in your ear.

## 'Meditation, Creativity, Peace' (2012)

**Harvilla:** You oughta spend more time listening to David Lynch's speaking voice. It is a beautiful, disarming, deeply affecting instrument, nasal and regal, whimsical and profound. It is exactly as soothing as his films are not. Particularly when he is speaking about what might very well be his true passion, his true love.

Transcendental meditation was introduced and popularized by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the '50s; among its most famous practitioners are the Beatles (who dabbled) and David Lynch (who did not dabble). "I started Transcendental Meditation in 1973 and have not missed a single meditation ever since," he writes in an intro/mission statement for the David Lynch Foundation. "Twice a day, every day." (A session takes 15–20 minutes.)

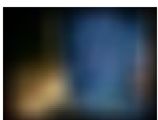
Founded in 2005, the foundation aims to "prevent and eradicate the all-pervasive epidemic of trauma and toxic stress among at-risk populations through promoting widespread implementation of the evidence-based Transcendental Meditation (TM) program in order to improve their health, cognitive capabilities and performance in life." This is the source of Lynch's philanthropy and creativity both.

The topic comes up in most interviews or even critical studies; this is a crucial part of understanding both the man and the traumatic and stressful art he makes. The 2012 David Lynch Foundation–backed documentary *Meditation, Creativity, Peace*, available in full on YouTube, is the ideal deep dive. It's mostly rough footage of Lynch on a 16-country tour, speaking on panels and conferences and such, spreading his very specific gospel. The first words out of his mouth are, "This is a doughnut." He is standing in his painting studio, brandishing a doughnut. "Transcendental Meditation gives an experience much sweeter than the sweetness of this doughnut. It gives the experience of the sweetest nectar of life — pure bliss consciousness."

The doc is just over an hour long and has a choppy, undergrad-project feel, but skip around and you'll find him on various stages, his hair swept up in various pleasing geometric husks, answering various earnest questions like, "How do you make difference between real experiences and imaginary ones in meditation?" He waves his hands and wiggles his fingers; he likens his creative process to a sort of cosmic fishing expedition. ("I'm as surprised as anybody when the idea pops in.") Lynch is famously averse to telling anyone what his work *means*, or even clearing up *what the hell happened*, exactly. The *what* and the *why* are locked boxes to him. But this is a quick, cheery way at letting him sketch out the *how*, in his own words, in his own inimitable and invaluable voice.

## Lynchian YouTube

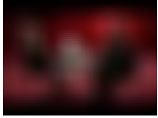
**Herman:** Every night I say a prayer of thanks for this YouTube playlist, which compiles wide-ranging fragments of Lynch ephemera into one easily perusable place. Coupled with his long and wide-ranging career, Lynch's radical eccentricity makes him nearly as watchable in front of the camera as behind it. Look at this 2002 French TV interview to promote Lynch's music, which really looks as though it was directed by Lynch himself:



Why is Lynch shirtless? Who knows! What does the mine shaft have to do with anything? Who cares! Is he caked in dirt or blood? Better not to ask! Lynch never comments on the circumstances of the interview, as disconnected as they seem from the subject at hand. In

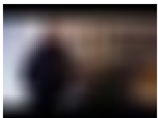
just four minutes of promotional press, Lynch manages to achieve the same effect he does in hours-long narrative features, creating a world unto itself. It's a fitting start to a rabbit hole.

We move on to a blatant stunt by a luxury brand that nonetheless paid off handsomely:



I have two favorite moments in this heavily and obviously edited conversation between Lynch and Patti Smith "that, like their art, often ignored convention or structure" (as the opening voice-over euphemistically puts it). One is Lynch stating his desire to talk about Pussy Riot with the disarming earnestness that marks his public persona; the other is one of my favorite metaphors for the director's creative process, which he's often described as a matter of channeling ideas that come to him rather than generating ideas himself. "It's as if, in the other room, there's a puzzle," he says, "and all of the pieces are together. But in my room, they just flip one piece at a time into me." It only gets more convoluted from there.

My favorite clip of the bunch actually doesn't feature Lynch at all, though he figures heavily into its story:



A friend once remarked to me that many of Lynch's collaborators are people who already seem to be one of his characters (like Frank Silva, the *Twin Peaks* crew member Lynch famously recruited to play BOB because he liked the way he crouched behind a bed frame). Composer Angelo Badalamenti is a perfect example, an honest-to-God Brooklyn Italian who makes the eerie, heartbreaking music responsible for much of Lynch's atmosphere. Take the theme for "Laura Palmuh," which Badalamenti says he composed in an improvisatory fashion that mirrors Lynch's own. One of TV's most iconic themes, it turns out, was written on the spot from a simple cue: a soft wind blowing through some sycamore trees.

## 'David Lynch: The Man From Another Place*,*' by Dennis Lim (2015)

**Herman:** For such a titanic force in American moviemaking, there's been surprisingly little definitive criticism on Lynch and his filmography. Published in 2015, this short volume from the Film Society of Lincoln Center's director of programming both helps to rectify that gap and helps explain why it exists. This excerpt, published in *The New Yorker,* is one of

the very few pieces of writing about David Lynch that gets at the problem of writing about David Lynch rather than simply demonstrating it:

It is not uncommon for artists to believe that their art should speak for itself. But Lynch's aphasia is born of a protectiveness that verges on superstition. Words for him are not just reductive; they are anathema to his view of art as fundamentally enigmatic. He says often that his films should leave "room to dream." To decode a film, to proffer interpretations, to divulge the source of an idea—all these simply mean less room and fewer possible dreams.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his acute understanding of this paradox, Lim manages to both interpret and helpfully contextualize Lynch's body of work, creating an indispensable companion to an artist who frequently leaves us desperate for someone to tell us *what the hell is going on.* Lim can't quite do *that,* but he comes as close as anyone.



